

Three comments on the Executive Order “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again”

By Michael W. Mehaffy, Nikos A. Salingaros, and Ann Sussman.



Those who reject Classical and traditional architectures out of hand fail to recognize their important biophilic qualities, emerging from evolution and refinement over centuries to produce some of the most successful, well-loved and enduring places in the world – like the British Museum in London.

Photo: Michael Mehaffy. Used with permission.

Preface

A draft of an executive order titled “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again” is moving forward towards possible signing by President Donald J. Trump. The proposed document favors Classical Greco-Roman design typologies for federal buildings in Washington, DC and elsewhere throughout the USA. This order

would revise the current rules that regulate the design of federal buildings contracted through the GSA (*General Services Administration* – a Federal agency managing the construction, administration, and upkeep of US Government buildings and real estate). It was initiated by the *National Civic Art Society*, a Washington, DC based nonprofit organization that disapproves of what the US government has been building for decades. According to the *New York Times*, the chairman of the *National Civic Art Society*, Mr. Marion Smith, stated that: “For too long architectural elites and bureaucrats have derided the idea of beauty, blatantly ignored public opinions on style, and have quietly spent taxpayer money constructing ugly, expensive, and inefficient buildings.”

1. The Executive Order “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again”.

By Michael W. Mehaffy, Ph.D.

Whether or not one is a supporter of President Trump (and I personally am not) this action is likely to provoke a much-needed debate about the mandating of style. It is interesting to hear some architects howling over this proposed action, at the same time that they have often sought to impose their own preferred style – a variant of modernism or neo-modernism. Often this has been done through interpretation of the Venice Charter’s Article 9, that new works “*must bear a contemporary stamp*”, which they interpret as mandating modernism. (They conveniently ignore Article 6, which states that “*wherever the traditional setting exists, it must be kept... No new construction, demolition or modification which would alter the relations of mass and color must be allowed.*”)

Now that the shoe is on the other foot, perhaps we should all step back and take a deep breath, and assess what really matters in new design. Is it solely the predilections of the architect community, in their sovereign judgments of what is good (often “modern”) architecture? Or are there broader

goals, and a broader community that should have a voice? Is there a necessity to consider the evolutionary gifts of the past, and the evidence for their continued ability to deliver beautiful, enduring, sustainable habitat?

The time has come that the profession must produce a better answer to this question.

Michael W. Mehaffy is Senior Researcher with the Ax:son Johnson Foundation and the Centre for the Future of Places at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, and an author, educator, urban designer, planner, and strategic development consultant with an international practice. He has held teaching and/or research appointments at seven graduate institutions in six countries, and he is on the editorial boards of two international journals of urban design. After graduate study in architecture with pioneering architect Christopher Alexander at U.C. Berkeley, he received his Ph.D. in architecture at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. He recently wrote about the Venice Charter and its use to enforce style here:

<https://www.archdaily.com/932797/colonialist-modernism-strikes-again>

2. Architectural Bullies Protest Restricting Their Ability to Terrorize Everyone Else.



National Palace and Convent of Mafra near Lisbon, Portugal, 1730. Use of a locally-adapted and evolved Classical/Baroque style generated a monumental edifice that is both a source of national pride, and is enjoyed viscerally by the people who visit it. Photo: Nikos Salingaros.

By Nikos A. Salingaros, Ph.D.

It is well-accepted that the public's preference for a wholesome, restorative architecture in our greatest public institutions has been ignored during the past several decades. In its stead, we have seen monstrous, unfriendly buildings funded by the US Federal Government. Worse than the erection of inhuman and ugly environments is the fact that those images have come to represent the Nation. In their visual impact, how different is the impression they give of American Democracy from the totalitarian dictatorships that have used the same brutal and faceless architecture to express their power over their citizens?

As soon as word of the president's executive order on creating a more beautiful and human "official" face for the United States – as expressed in its major government buildings – was out, all hell broke loose. The usual group of architectural bullies who had intimidated past administrations into

accepting absurd or totalitarian designs for public buildings felt their continuing hegemony threatened. They of course are protesting, crying out about “loss of freedom of expression” and other stock justifications for their past bullying. Journalists and architectural critics joined in the chorus of protests, again with the usual emotional trigger phrases about “pluralism”, deceptively ignoring how for years those architectural bullies stamped out any attempts at pluralism.

This has become an attack on traditional architecture, using the president as a target, which is a smoke screen. The architectural problem for public buildings is serious but not political, and this proposal is the first optimistic solution to be offered in decades.

Nikos A. Salingaros is Professor of Mathematics at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and a well-known architectural theorist and urbanist. Author of several books on architectural and urban theory, he directs Master's and Doctoral students in architecture at universities around the world. He shared the 2018 Clem Labine Traditional Building Award with Michael Mehaffy, and is the Winner of the 2019 Stockholm Cultural Award for Architecture. He received a Ph.D. in Theoretical Physics from Stony Brook University. He was the principal editor of Christopher Alexander's four-volume book The Nature of Order. Salingaros recently published a review of James Stevens Curl's book "Making Dystopia".

<https://inference-review.com/article/the-rise-of-the-architectural-cult>

3. Classical and Traditional Buildings Fit Human Biology: Modern Architecture Doesn't, and that Matters for Building a Healthy Future.



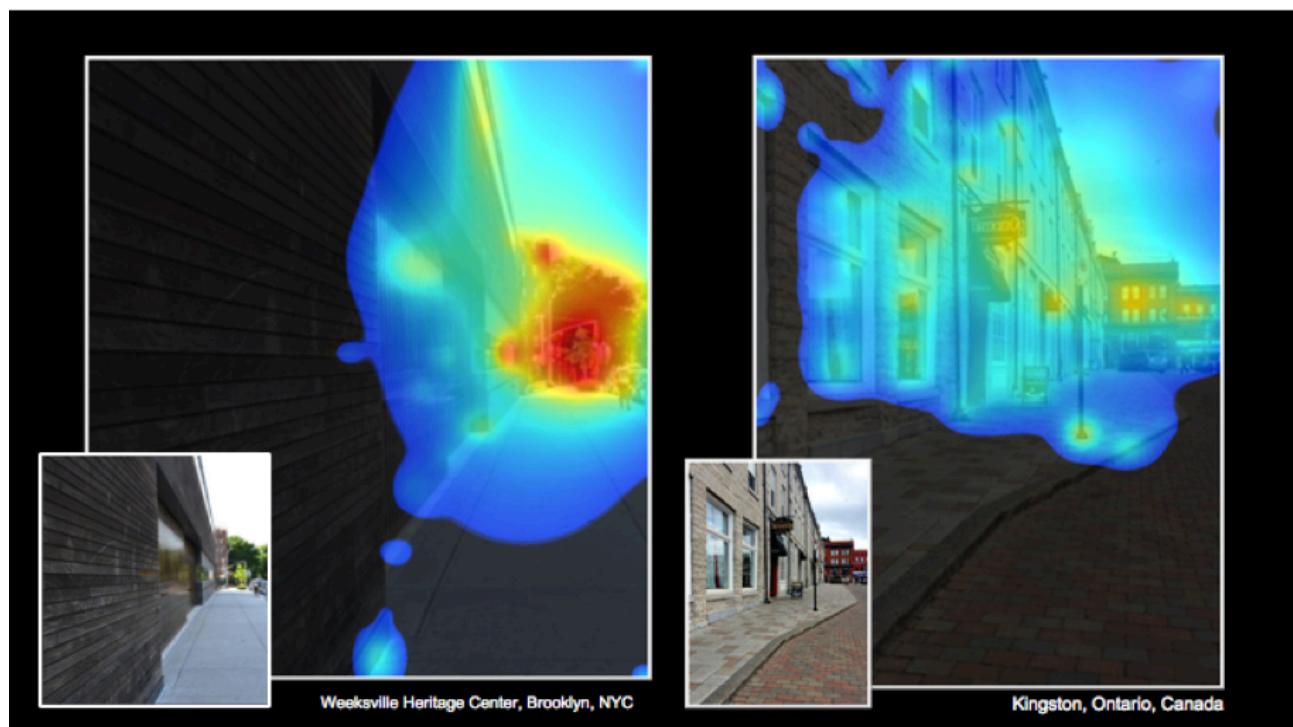
Two comparable street scenes from the pedestrian perspective. A questionnaire survey shows that viewers prefer to walk along the one on the right. Given the choice, nobody chooses to walk along the one on the left. ©Ann Sussman

By Ann Sussman, R.A.

President Trump and the National Civic Art Society's recommendation to make federal buildings beautiful again – shunning modern architecture and reverting to classical traditions – is a very good one. Not only because it will make the nation's capital more coherent, it will make Washington, DC a more memorable place generally, and one which people enjoy seeing and being in.

We live in a remarkable time in the early 21st-century where we can better understand how the human experience functions, including how perception happens. New biometric tools let us track in real time how stressful or soothing new buildings are, and how the body implicitly responds without our conscious awareness to our surroundings. This new science has brought to the fore the fact that though we live in modern times, our bodies remain ancient, and that evolution has pre-set our response to visual stimuli more than most realize.

Classical and traditional architecture meets our bodies and brain where they are, in an evolutionary sense, providing the bi-laterally symmetrical, hierarchical facades that we are hard-wired to easily see and enjoy taking in. Modern architecture, with its blankness, random arrangements, and asymmetries, does not.



The physiological reasons are revealed by eye-tracking data created with 3M's Visual Attention Software: our unconscious brain will not even let us look at the minimalist wall! It finds it avoidant, and directs us away from it. ©Gary Harley.

Bottom: Geneticsofdesign.com. Used with permission.

We now know that many post-war buildings stress the brain and that creates stress responses, leading to everything from headaches to pedestrians avoiding entire new sections in a city. Apple founder Steve Jobs once said: "The broader one's understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have." That is true not only for computers but also for the places we call home. The more we know about ourselves, and our animal nature, the more we can accommodate it by creating successful human habitat.

Ann Sussman, RA, an author, researcher and college instructor

is passionate about understanding how buildings influence people emotionally. Her book, Cognitive Architecture, Designing for How We Respond to the Built Environment (2015) co-authored with Justin B. Hollander, won the 2016 Place Research Award from the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA). In 2019, she co-sponsored the 1st International Conference on Urban Experience and Design at Tufts University (Ux+design2019), bringing together creative thinkers to explore 'evidence-based' design practices and biometric tools for assessing the human experience of place. She has given more than 80 lectures at regional conferences and universities, including at Greenbuild/Berlin in 2018 and Greenbuild/Amsterdam in 2019. This year she's scheduled to present a biometric workshop at the AIA National Conference in Los Angeles in May. Currently, she teaches an introductory course on perception, Architecture & Cognition, at the Boston Architectural College. Her articles explaining how biometrics reveal how the human brain and body respond to architecture include:

<https://commonedge.org/game-changing-eye-tracking-studies-reveal-how-we-actually-see-architecture/>

<https://commonedge.org/three-foundational-errors-in-architectural-thinking-and-how-to-fix-them/>

<https://commonedge.org/the-mental-disorders-that-gave-us-modern-architecture/>

First published in